

WOMAN AND PATRIARCHY: A STUDY OF SUNITI NAMJOSHI

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ABSTRACT

Society demands mute acceptance from a woman. She cannot even cry. Her crying is considered as her rebellion. A woman only accepts the patriarchal structures and is always oppressed by a man. A woman is always oppressed as she is considered as ‘weaker sex’ or ‘Inferior sex’. The concept of feminism in the society started the thought process of equality of sex. Feminism, both as a concept and a movement, has emerged as a reaction against the atrocities of patriarchy. Suniti Namjoshi has pictured feminism in various aspects. She is a great feminist myth maker. By myth making, she is actually evaluating her identity, perceptions reordering the world and value systems projected in the past.

KEYWORDS: Reaction against the Atrocities & Identity, Perceptions Reordering the World

INTRODUCTION

PAPER

Woman of every race are the only discriminated group with no territory, no country of their own, not even neighborhood. In a patriarchy a poor man’s house may be his castle but even a rich woman’s body is not her own. Somewhere in our lives each of us needs a free place, a little psychic territory. (Steinem)

From the beginning, man is considered as the ‘superior sex’ or the ‘stronger sex’ while woman as ‘inferior’ or ‘weaker sex’. Generally “The Sexiest attitude are seen in the use of words referring to women having negative connotations. For example, men ‘discuss’ and women ‘gossip’ and ‘chat’ and men are seen as ‘forceful and masterful’ but women are described as ‘bossy and domineering’ ” (K. Singh 10). This concept was prevalent in almost all the countries in the world. Feminism is the consequence of the culture or society shaped and governed by men to suit their own interests regardless of women’s basic need and happiness. The term feminism used as support of political rights for women came from the French word ‘feminin’. Feminism has its origin in the struggle for women’s right which began late in the 18th century more particularly with Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). The history of Feminism is traceable to 1830s in America and then migrated to England in 1890s. History is a witness to the fact that in all civilizations, the personality of woman is sought to be rated under and she has been “marginalized”.

Feminism, both as a concept and a movement, has emerged as a reaction against the atrocities of patriarchy. Late on John Stuart Mill in his *The Subjection of Women* (1869) also felt the importance of economic dignity for the dignity of woman. This is noticeable in the critical work of Rebecca West and Virginia Woolf’s essay on women authors who suffered from economic and cultural disadvantages in “Patriarchal” society. Her book *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) became a classic “document” of the feminist critical movement.

Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* is a symbol of economic security and self-respect inherent in one's private space. A Shakespeare cannot be born in the patriarchal prison house. A woman has to develop capability before she can acquire negative capability. A woman must discover her voice, her vision, before she can show the reality of other women, howsoever ordinary or obscure they may be. Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* argues that the "essence of politics is power." The male domination in Western culture has no natural or immutable basis in biology. Millett makes a clear distinction between sex & gender. Sex (male/ female) is biological and gender (masculine/feminine) is cultural.

Simone de Beauvoir through her work *The Second Sex* believes that this secondary position imposed on women is by strong environmental forces of social traditions and education which have been under the control of man. Man considers himself "Subject" and "Absolute" and woman is the "Other". (Beauvoir 29). Modern women poets, though speaking of individual experience, have represented the woes and throes of the overage women. Things common to all women are: sense of frustration, inner conflict, inner disintegration, sense of fear, pain and silent suffering, persecution complex, mental agony, repressed feelings, suppressed desires, sense of meaninglessness, restlessness and hopelessness in life, and identity crisis.

Always the view of feminism has so far been confined to Western culture and literature. It doesn't imply that feminism is a western phenomenon with little relevance to Indian society and literature. In fact feminism is like water that takes the shape and colour of the container. The feminist movement in India emerged during the early 70's, when exploitation of women had reached unprecedeted levels. In India, this sex-inequality or superiority of one above other is a social reality. From the very beginning a woman's function in life is to provide the male with sexual gratification and pleasure.

Feminism in the Indian context is the by-product of the western liberalism in general and feminist conviction in particular. It precipitates in a quest for identity and realization and fulfillment of self, sometimes by shunning the social norms and sometimes by accepting the traditional set-up. Feminist English literature is a spectrum of diverse colours and shades representing different attitudes that varies from conscious of the 'Self' to apparently aggressively "Self-seeking". Thus, feminism is not confined to one country, but is a global phenomenon.

The majority of female voices after independence of India show influences of the feminist ideology though it has roots in the west. A drastic change in the choice and treatment of themes is observed by the new Indian poets at the dawn of the new millennium. The same characteristics are found in Suniti Namjoshi's poetry.

Suniti Namjoshi has pictured feminism in various aspects. She considers the Bible as male-biased version. Particularly the "Genesis" is a male dominated version of the story of life. Namjoshi in a poem "Her Form in Clear Water" rewrites the Bible story of the fall of (WO) Man.

Her form in clear water made him

Raise his head.

His length slid about her limbs. Eve

In her turn

Encircled the snake, pressing her body

To him.

Curious coupling, brown snake and Eve,
 Caught in a twist
 Of the blind green coil being Adam
 And evil and Eve.

(*The Jackass and the Lady*)

The Eve pictured by Suniti Namjoshi in this imagery is happy to be coupled with the snake rather than being considered fallen with Adam and remained chained with him.

Suniti Namjoshi is a great feminist myth maker. By myth making, she is actually evaluating her identity, perceptions reordering the world and value systems projected in the past. In her passion to create a myth she has experienced with various popular characters of great authors. One of the examples of her great myth making spirit is ‘Mary Shelley’s’ *Frankenstein*. She has explored the possibility of highlighting her feminine sentiments through ‘Baby F’, a female replica of *Frankenstein*. This child Baby F becomes the epitome of her spirit, her lesbianism & her inner conscience. She coined the character *Baby Frankenstein* to reveal her feelings towards her mother. *Frankenstein* conceives a creature and creates it. However, the creature becomes ugly and has some kind of supernatural strength. The ugly creature is not included in the human society. He gets higher knowledge through books. He has all basic human needs and sentiments. *Frankenstein* tries to control the creature. But he is not tamed. *Frankenstein* gets killed by his own created creature. In turn, the creature of Namjoshi is lesbian daughter. The myth reveals the crisis between a mother and a daughter. Probably in this poem Suniti Namjoshi has tried to convey inner resentment of her spoiled relationship with her mother. The very first verse is the testimony of this fact:

It might have been simpler, mother,
 If you had found me in a cabbage patch,
 Green and round and exceeding healthy.
 Then you could have eaten me.
 Or if I had been a caterpillar
 And you had been a leaf.”

(*From the Bedside Book of Nightmares 7*)

Many times mother’s dreams for her child and the child’s dreams for herself don’t coincide. There are numerous desires of a mother that faces failure in the hands of her daughter. The mother wants her to be a young lady of good tastes; with all the qualities a good daughter possesses. On the contrary the daughter resists all such developments. Due to this the mother is always fearful of her *Frankenstein*’s child. She has panic and frustration to see the behaviour pattern of her daughter. Let us examine a poetic dialogue of the daughter:

They told me you were brave and rode horses
with an extreme recklessness.

When still very little.

I grew up thinking that I was also brave.
But of your fear,
Of how it grew inside you and sat there
Like a mountain, I know nothing at all.

(From the Bedside Book of Nightmares 11)

The second section “Creature” further focuses on the relationship between the creator and creature. Dealing with the conquest of freedom, at all costs, this section deals with the images of violence. In her passion to write myths she has rewritten Shakespeare’s ‘The Tempest’. She introduced the female version of ‘Caliban’ in the form of the third and final sequence of the text, “Snapshots of Caliban”. She has presented the story in a series of snapshots. She has left gaps to be understood by the reader. She has introduced excerpts from ‘Caliban’s Notebook’, ‘Miranda’s Diary’ and ‘Prospero’s meditation’ and picturized the narration beautifully. The inner stresses like the experiences of discrimination, humiliation and exploitation of Caliban through ‘Caliban’ is penned down beautifully. It seems that ‘Caliban’ is the mouthpiece of the inner resentment of the poet. Namjoshi’s re-telling of fables, myths and canonical stories provide patriarchal knowledge from one generation to another. Through her art of myth making, Suniti Namjoshi tries to serve feminist purposes.

Suniti Namjoshi has sometimes represented a very pathetic picture of womanhood. She deplores “the disappointments, deprivation and anguish faced by women who deeply aspire for more space within the existing social structures” (Goel 180). Through her poetry she deals with psychological conflict, hate, maladjustment, wounds, rejection and depression. She has shown a picture of a woman in a gilded sarong. She considered herself as living first time in life but she is found dead too soon. The lines of the poem “Gill and his Mermaid” are as below:

A woman in a gilded sarong said,
'Now for the first time in your life
You live. The palm trees are real,
The sand is real and I am real.
I have made this possible.'
But one day she died
And there was only a great dead fish
On the show which wasn't quite real anymore.

(Cyclone in Pakistan)

Namjoshi’s poems are nothing else but expression of her inner conflicts. She wrote under the title *The Jackass and the Lady* “It’s apparent to many women that in a humanist universe, which has been male-centred historically women

are “the other”, together with the birds and the beasts and the rest of creation” (*Collectively Poems* 29). Through her poems she laments over the sadness, discontentment and frustration in her life. She beautifully explains the compulsions that urge her to write her silence in the form of words as follows:

“And she wrote her poems because muteness

Terrified her,

Seeing, as she did, in the level lake water

An upside down swan.(1-4)

Being an excellent myth maker she re-writes the Cinderella tale also. Namjoshi instead of giving the comfortable ending ends her story with the insistent interrogation: “then what happened?” This style of her writing provides novelty to her work. The tale was taken ahead as follows:-

“The Prince married Cinderella (It pays to have such very small feet.) But soon they started squabbling ‘you married me for my money,’ was the Prince’s charge. ‘You married me for my looks’, was C’s reply. ‘But your looks will fade, where as my money will last. Not a fair bargain. ‘No’, said Cinderella and simply walked out.

AND THEN WHAT HAPPENED?

(Vijayasree 80)

Suniti Namjoshi has written “Discourse with the dead”. It was related to death of her father who was killed in a plane crash, when she was only 12. She wrote, “I Loved My Father. I also liked him, for the child, for his daughter, his only crime was that he died. For the woman writing the poems, the central task was to classify and shape the raw material of the grief of the child. At the time I wasn’t a feminist.”

She wrote her silent sufferings as follows:

“First a live man,

Then a dead man:

Where is my father?

In the sky, a personal star,

Shedding

Effulgence.

While you were lost in the forest

We lived in the world.

Why don’t you come back,

Walking

Towards us, by chance, as it were,

Covered

With tendrils?"

(*The Authentic Lie* 13-14)

Thus, we see through her poetic works Suniti Namjoshi illustrates a very different picture of female. In her poetry we find some times a very strong, firm and a woman with distinctive attitude. On the other hand sometimes she is as tender, sensitive and transient as a petal of a flower. Her female characters like Miranda or Caliban are masterpiece creation. Her texts move beyond endings and eschew closures. Here it is relevant to quote Helene Cixous's point of view on feminine text that states, a feminine text, "is always endless, without ending: there's no closure, it does not stop... "

(Vijayasree, 159)

Her text depicts plural possibilities. There is coherence between the poet, her text and the reader. Subjectivity is another important feature of Namjoshi's feminism. We find Namjoshi's feminine sentiments in her poetry through the different characters portrayed by her. Her poetry is a sketch of inner lady in Suniti Namjoshi. G.H. Lewes in his poem "A Gentle Hint to Writing Women" illustrates:

"Are there no husbands, lovers
 Brothers, friends to cuddle and
 Console? Are there no stockings
 To darn... no purses to make, no
 Braces to embroider? My idea of
 A perfect woman is one who can
 Write but won't."

(Lewes 189)

CONCLUSIONS

But Suniti Namjoshi goes beyond this generalization and proves that a perfect woman is not perfect when she is serving husband, pampering lovers or taking care of friends. Moreover, a perfect woman is not that who is engrossed completely in homely chores. Suniti Namjoshi even goes beyond the traditional feminism when a female is a lover of a male. Her conception of feminism starts when a female loves not only on the grounds of passion but also on the grounds of sex and physical pleasure. And here she is purely subjective. She speaks of her own self boldly.

Namjoshi is a feminist and is actively involved in feminist cause. She represents the esteem as well as self-respect and in more organized terms self-reliance of a woman. Suniti Namjoshi is a mouthpiece of this concept. Her poetry highlights the free spirit of a woman who has transcended the barriers of caste, creed, nationality or sex.

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